

**INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND
TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Rural Skills Australia

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Rural Skills Australia Response to the Inquiry into Vocational Education and Training in New South Wales Terms of Reference

Background

Rural Skill Australia (RSA) provides advice and assistance on rural and related vocational education and training (VET) to the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) and its affiliated membership, and service providers including Australian Apprenticeship Centres, Jobs Services Australia members, Registered Training Organisations and Group Training Organisations.

Since its inception in 1995 RSA has worked in conjunction with the NFF and its member bodies to foster improved rural involvement in VET, with a view to enhancing the skills and capacities of new entrants, existing workers and primary producers alike.

RSA has contributed significantly to increasing the number of rural and related Australian Apprenticeships commencements each year with a view to combating an ageing rural workforce and shrinking rural communities, and to equip the next generation of rural workers with transferable, recognised and valued skills.

RSA is a not-for-profit organisation, helping to increase the skills base of rural industries, particularly agriculture, horticulture and veterinary nursing. RSA promotes Australian Apprenticeships into these industries.

The RSA Board has representatives from the NFF, the Australian Workers' Union and various farm commodity groups working towards the development of education and training for the industry throughout rural and regional Australia.

Trainees employed as 'Australian Apprentices' help keep rural communities buoyant and sustainable. Farmers, growers, graziers and horticulturists can improve efficiency, productivity and prosperity by expanding the product and skills base of their industry. Vocational training is currently available for, but not limited to, beef cattle; cotton production; goat production; production horticulture; grain production; milk harvesting; pig

production, rural merchandising, sheep and wool, sugar cane production, poultry production, dairy, landscape, and veterinary nursing.

In 2011/12 RSA made submissions to the:

- Senate Inquiry - Higher education and skills training to support future demand in agriculture and agribusiness in Australia; and
- Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into Agricultural Education and Training.

These submissions support the response to this enquiry.

Introduction

This submission considers the Terms of Reference of the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 6, to inquire into and report on vocational education and training in New South Wales, and in particular:

(a) The factors influencing student choice about entering the vocational education and training system including:

A number of factors influence the choices and decisions people make before entering the vocational education and training system. These include:

- Poor perception of VET courses held by those offering the advice
- Poor understanding of the pathways and opportunities the VET system can offer to graduates
- University is presented as the only pathway to students and their parents by those in schools who offer career advisory services
- The same advisors are looking down to VET as the alternative for the student at the bottom end of the class grade scale, or to the school drop outs (This creates a belief that VET is the poor, dead end option rather than being the equal or other option).
- Funding for courses and the lack of year to year consistency in funding for delivery of training, both from the RTO perspective and from the user perspective
- The promotion of VET has been directly possible a number of in school programs essentially managed through peak bodies where the ownership and the focus is on increasing exposure to students of the opportunities available, career wise and educationally, including:
 - Cows Create Careers and other careers and pathway centred literature developed by Dairy Australia
 - Cotton Catchment Communities Schools programs delivered in schools within cotton regions across NSW and QLD
 - The Namoi and Border Rivers Gwydir CMA run a very successful program for high school students known as the Property Planning Competition
 - Catchment Management Authorities (CMA) also host a variety of school programs across the state
 - The Royal Agricultural Show Society hosts an annual 'Careers in Agriculture' showcase at the Sydney Royal Easter Show
 - The National Merino Challenge, funded by Australian Wool Innovations has provided a balanced promotion of VET and Tertiary pathways for young people in NSW and Australia to help these young people embark on a career into Sheep and Wool.

It is important to be aware that in agriculture, a VET graduate can be a very highly sought after and highly skilled person across Australia and overseas. This key message needs to

be conveyed to school level across all jurisdictions, at the present time, VET is often regarded as a poor choice.

(i) Motivation to study

Typically the motivation towards a chosen field of study is to achieve short or long term goals. Without an aim in life there is reasonably no motivation to study at all, let alone study towards a chosen field. Arguably different people will have experiences that will probably influence their interests and later fields of study. Early experiential years can be seen as a key influence in motivating study and selecting fields of study. A young person's environment, including family, social and economic environment are key motivators and should not be overlooked as critically important in shaping an individual's personal development and career

(ii) Choice of course, course location and method of study

Choice of Course learning, and presumed vocational pathways are often limited to the academic achievements of individuals. Course entry requirements by training institutions can restrict entry into many studies to those who are assessed as capable of succeeding in a course.

Location of learners can limit the capacity for study especially in 'alien' environments that are unfamiliar to students, for example, country students coping in the city or vice versa. Financial constraints relating to relocation or living away from home have a significant influence on available course locations.

Methods of learning can vary, for example, from on-job, off the job institutional, residential, e-learning at school, on the job and/or at home. All these options or a combination of them can be available to learners. Generally, registered training organisations (RTOs) will offer their preferred option or the only option available to them. The method of study (learning) is therefore often limited by the training delivery method of the RTO, that might not necessarily be the best or preferred delivery method for the learner, but the only training delivery method available to them. This is clearly not the most desirable scenario.

(iii) Barriers to participation, including students in the non-government education and home schooling sectors

Barriers to participation might include:

- Funding shortfalls for students in non-government schools and the home schooling sector restrict the participation of students educated through these sectors
- Perceptions by parents, high school teachers and some young people that VET can limit their career progression
- Perceptions relating to employment conditions (the greasy mechanic workshop or the 15 hour days for farm worker). Whilst these perceptions may be associated to visions held in the past and may exist in some cases, this perception is certainly not a regular occurrence for the majority of VET graduates
- Low socio economic backgrounds, particularly those impacted on by reduced access to training through the implementation of Smart & Skilled, particularly if they misused their entitlement to training
- Distance and geographic isolation
- Courses offered on campus at the nearest training provider

- Facilities available at nearest training provider
- Poor literacy and numeracy foundations skills
- Lack of quality career advice or no career advice provided to individuals whilst at high school

(b) The role played by public and private vocational education providers and industry in:

(i) Educational linkages with secondary and higher education

In vocational areas including agriculture, horticulture, conservation & land management and animal care management, training providers typically hold sound linkages with industry. These linkages are essential, as the areas of training are required to include an extensive and intensive workplace component in order for a student to be assessed as competent against work based competencies related to the area of training and occupation.

The challenge for the school sector delivering VET is to maintain a strong industry link. Whilst it is mandatory in NSW schools for all VET in Schools students to conduct work placement in year 11 and 12, challenges remain for many schools in accessing appropriate work placement and links to the workplace.

Industry could play a more direct role to increase and raise a positive and relevant profile in terms of developing, improving and exposing industry profiles in the eyes of students in schools looking to make these educational linkages.

Industry could take a greater role in career events to expose young people to career progress options. Corporate website career pages and career focused online platforms can help to ensure that young people can better access pathway related information and advice to guide in transition from school into areas including agriculture. This is particularly of value where an organisation or peak body, representing a sector, is promoting and endorsing VET pathways for their sector or business.

Rural Skills Australia with the support of the Australian Government has produced an online 'Rural Careers Guide' bringing together a series of case studies across the agricultural industries that provide first-hand accounts of what rural jobs involve. Industry could be encouraged to take a more hands on approach to being involved in the promotion of VET pathways across agriculture.

The education and training system has arguably 'played favourites' for too long to the higher education and traditional trades. This is evident in the brochure 'SCIENCE - Taking you Places - Pathways for a Dynamic Career in Australia's Primary Industries' published by the Primary Industry Centre for Science and Education (PICSE) with support from the Australian Government Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry and Agrifood Skills Australia where the focus and emphasis was on higher education.

However, in this publication Professor Lyn Beazley AO FSTE (Chief Scientist of Western Australia and Chair of PICSE) wrote:

"AGRICULTURE MUST INSPIRE OUR TEACHERS - A long term approach to school education and career attraction is necessary to reverse

the declining skills base in Australia's primary industries and its potential impact on our food security and innovation.

Australia's capacity to feed 70 million people here and abroad is dependent on improving knowledge and understanding of food and fibre production among school-age children.

We must focus on a greater exposure to the primary industries at all levels of schooling: primary, secondary and tertiary.

The Health of Australian Science report by the Chief Scientist of Australia, Professor Ian Chubb, confirmed that senior school participation in science had declined, and cited agriculture, chemistry, mathematics and physics among the undergraduate disciplines with dwindling numbers.

Professor Chubb's report recommended encouraging greater student involvement in science to improve uptake at school and identified teachers as an important source of inspiration.

Agriculture is not widely seen as a modern industry; however teachers who can quote an increasing number of examples from agriculture and the biosciences could contribute to changing this outdated perception.

Industry outreach is important and the PICSE program – which provided resources for both secondary school students and teachers – was a valuable way to take information about primary industries into the classroom.

Real life and on-job and structured learning opportunities are essential. Turning theory into practice is critical. AQF levels 5-10 tend to have a higher focus on the cognitive learning (e.g. development of knowledge and intellectual skills). AQF levels 1- 4 generally tend to have a higher focus on the psychomotor domain (e.g. using motor skills, coordination and physical movement). The higher AQF levels do not necessarily translate or support the transfer of knowledge to skills to the psychomotor domain.

The 'gap' between high levels of knowledge and intellectual skills and functional and operational skills needs to be filled and overlapped. Strategic use of infrastructure and integrated use of trainers and learning programs could be adopted as improvements to education and training across the secondary and tertiary education systems. They are currently too 'siloed'.

NSW has currently 4 agricultural high schools. There was a recommendation to establish an agricultural high school in Dubbo, made in the Pratley Review into Agricultural Education and Training in New South Wales, released in 2012. There are currently two in Sydney - James Ruse and Hurlstone that have both seen reductions in student uptake in agriculture and increases in student interest in law, medicine and engineering related subject choices. These schools are also home to ageing agricultural infrastructure, which may have slipped below acceptable industry standards. NSW agricultural high schools should be highly valued and well resourced.

There are opportunities and roles for businesses and large enterprises operating in agriculture to play a more significant role in supporting and developing collaborative and shared partnerships not dissimilar to the way sports high schools have developed strong and integrated partnerships with outside stakeholders and industry.

There are minimum infrastructure needs for the effective delivery of high quality agricultural education and training. Modern, new and well maintained plant, equipment, tools and real life situations and scenarios are critically essential not only for high quality agricultural education and training but also to attract and retain students and trainees. High quality animals and plant breeds that are recognised as such are also essential. It is important for agricultural students and trainees to make a connection between the importance of the infrastructure provided for them and the importance of the learning they are looking to acquire. This is not only important for the learners but also for educators and trainers. The best material and equipment will attract and retain the best educators and trainers.

(ii) The development of skills in the New South Wales economy

The adoption of Smart and Skilled resulted in the removal of several private RTOs with significant and valued links with rural and related industries from the public funded space despite their quite impressive records and success with quality training provisions to both rural and related trainees and apprentices. This could contribute to a reduction in the number of trainees and apprentices in some sectors who have for a number of years routinely selected these private providers over TAFE and other private providers.

(iii) The development of opportunities for unemployed people, particularly migrants and persons in the mature workers category, to improve themselves and increase their life, education and employment prospects

There is an identified need to attract migrant workers to Australia to cover low to moderate skills needs, particularly to regional or remote areas that cannot attract workers from their 'home base'. It is generally perceived that migrant workers on 457 VISAs, do not require any VET training as they are generally performing skilled work, however there are often requirements that some may require chemical handling accreditation and all will require workplace health and safety knowledge.

The challenges facing mature workers have been well documented. "Too old to be employed, have been injured previously in the work place and are no longer employable or seen as a compensation risk to the employer" have been media exposed responses to mature workers.

Anecdotally, mature workers have extensive knowledge, can learn and adapt quickly, have a strong focus, motivation and reliable work ethic, arguably many qualities that are highly desirable in the workforce. Australian Government incentive funding for mature aged workers is a positive step forward; however these funding streams are generally reserved to the longer term unemployed.

An unforeseen impact of Smart & Skilled has been the adverse effect on students still at school.

- Numbers of 'students at risk' accessing VET whilst at school have dropped since the commencement of Smart & Skilled. This trend has been reported by TAFE Riverina, TAFE Hunter and TAFE Western. The risk with this trend is students will leave school with a lower skills base, fall through the cracks and add to the increasing statistic of unemployed youth. Students who previously accessed training in shearing, agriculture and welding, have not been able to access this training across western NSW.

- At the other end of the student band, ambitious students have also been affected. Those who would access extra-curricular training outside of their schooling were previously required to pay an enrolment fee of between \$950 and \$1100, now they are required to pay the entire cost of the qualification, ranging between \$4,570 and \$9,300. Tocal College who partner with TAFE Hunter to offer Wool Classing, TAFE Western and TAFE Riverina have reported the number of students completing Certificate IV in Wool Classing to enhance their post school job prospects have declined from 40 + in 2014 to only a single student in 2015.
- Tocal College report the declining numbers of students completing their first qualification after leaving school and going onto their second qualification as part of a logical progression in training pathway have dropped. This is as a direct result of the single entitlement available under Smart & Skilled, creating a barrier to students who wish to progressively grow their skills through training.

Positive Alternatives for RTO's

- Whilst it is recognised that funding increases in some instances have seen a drop in training, training providers have the option of offering 'fee for service' training to cater for demand driven training across NSW. Training providers have the flexibility to set fees at a reduced rate, reports that providers have established training set at the equivalent rate to that of the subsidised fee under Smart & Skilled.
- Interested people can enrol in subsidised training at a Certificate IV level or above, depending on the availability of funding for these courses. This is known as Targeted Priority Qualifications.
- Smart & Skilled concession fee for those who are eligible, including Commonwealth Welfare recipients / the dependant of a Commonwealth Welfare recipient or a student with a disability / the dependant of a disability support pensioner and are undertaking a second qualification in a single calendar year.
- Fee-Free Scholarships, from 1 July 2015, young people (aged 15-30) who meet the Smart and Skilled Fee-Free Scholarship criteria will be eligible for a government subsidy which covers their Smart and Skilled course fee.

(iv) The delivery of services and programs particularly to regional, rural and remote communities

There are opportunities for collaboration between schools and the tertiary sector and farming enterprises to work with each other and offer, for example, specialised training services, skills set delivery, on-job learning and structured workplace learning. This would require coordination, commitment and cooperation that in most cases cannot be resourced by individual enterprises or institutions. A project to identify such a model could be undertaken. A major component of such a project would be to identify the legal framework required to enable such activities as on-job or workplace experience as many farm enterprises are reluctant to expose themselves to liability. Liability risk management is anecdotally a significant impediment to enabling 'students' to participate in on-job learning activities. In addition to this farm managers do not have the time to be distracted from their essential daily activities by having to watch over others who may or may not be under their duty of care.

Thin markets such as agricultural training are a threat to training delivery. Too often training courses are developed and promoted and do not commence because there are insufficient numbers of enrolments to ensure the viability of the training program.

The cost burdens on trainees/students, for example, travel and accommodation and lost time off the job are often sufficiently prohibitive in regional Australia to influence enrolments to training programs.

There remains a real funding differentiation between costs of delivery between metropolitan and rural and remote delivery.

(c) Factors affecting the costs of delivery of affordable and accessible vocational education and training, including the influence of the co-contribution funding model on student behaviour and completion rates

Seemingly there are perceptions that VET training delivery costs the same no matter where it is delivered or what is being delivered – a one size fits all approach does not work for agriculture or for training delivered throughout regional NSW. Financial resourcing does not take into account the real costs of operating in regions and often in thin markets. Many training organisations servicing the NSW Training Market indicate that they are finding it increasingly difficult to make the dollars fit. Without a profitable enterprise, training organisations will not invest in VET delivery. Increasingly, mandatory compliance and regulations are impacting on the balance of delivery of actual training and assessment versus administration by training organisations.

(d) The effects of a competitive training market on student access to education, training, skills and pathways to employment, including opportunities and pathway to further education and employment for the most vulnerable in our community including those suffering a disability or severe disadvantage

In NSW, those with a disability and those who are Aboriginal, are not required to pay an enrolment fee, therefore should be able to access training.

(e) The level of industry participation in the vocational education and training sector, including the provision of sustainable employment opportunities for graduates, including Competency Based Training and the application of training packages to workforce requirements

Industry should be encouraged to have a more direct role in assessing the competency of students. At present, training and assessing can be conducted by the training provider. Whilst the assessor must have relevant and recent industry experience, funding models are such that the training provider receives payments under Smart & Skilled at commencement, mid-point and completion. As it could be argued that a conflict of interest arises when a training provider receives final payment when a student is deemed competent and completes following the assessment, this assessment should be completed by an independent provider.

(f) The Smart and Skilled reforms, including

- (i) Alternatives to the Smart & Skilled contestable training market and other funding policies**
- (ii) The effects of the Smart & Skilled roll out on School Based Apprenticeships**

(i)

Considerations towards an alternative to the existing Smart & Skilled funding model may be a funding model with a focus on Australian Apprenticeships:

- Create incentives for training providers to increase the cohort of trainees and apprentices within their student base
- Increasing training funding and incentive funding for Australian Apprentices
- Bringing existing worker funding back in line with new entrant funding

Increases in funding for the above, may be offset through a reduction in funding for non-Australian Apprentices.

Such a funding model may deter training organisations from prompting students to leave school and take up full time post school training under the Smart & Skilled entitlement. As has been widely reported in recent times, obvious advantages towards Australian Apprenticeships may also deter training providers from offering incentives under VET Fee Help as a way of attracting students into courses.

(ii)

School Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBATS) are funded from a separate funding stream outside of Smart & Skilled. Students attending non-government schools are required to cover the full cost of training whereas those attending government schools are not, and can have their training as an SBAT subsidised. This has been the case since the inception of SBATS and is unfair to students who wish to undertake an SBAT at school.

Smart & Skilled commenced in January 2015. The following table demonstrates the declining trend across all Australian Apprenticeship uptakes comparing the 2013/14 financial year to the 2014/15 financial year, the most accurate comparison available as at the end of the 2014/15 financial year, is June 2015, 6 months into Smart & Skilled.

	2013/14	2014/15	% Change
Total NSW State Wide School Based Trainees	1959	1646	-19%
Primary Industry School Based Trainees	109	102	-7%
Total NSW State Wide School Based Apprentices	389	498	+22%
Primary Industry School Based Trainees and Apprentices	22	22	No change
Total NSW State Wide Apprentices	18025	18803	+4%
Primary Industry Apprentices	752	804	+7%
Total NSW State Wide Trainees (New Entrants)	32088	26107	-23%
Primary Industry (New Entrants)	1006	712	-29%
Total NSW State Wide Trainees (Existing Workers)	14925	3230	-362%
Primary Industry (Existing Workers)	131	68	-48%

Source: Department of Industry (State Training Services)

The standout figure above is the steep decline in existing worker trainees. Anecdotal evidence relating to the causes of this sharp decline suggests the following:

- Employers won't pay higher enrolment fees under Smart & Skilled for most qualifications than was previously the case before the introduction of Smart & Skilled, particularly if their employee drops out of training and/or leaves their organisation. They see a risk that they won't recover their investment if they've paid the initial enrolment fee.
- The August 2014 reduction of incentive payments for existing workers undertaking an Australian Apprenticeship, particularly in traineeship market where the qualification does not lead an occupation listed within the National Skills Needs List (NSNL) or is not related to Aged Care, Child Care, Disability Care Workers or Enrolled Nurses.
- Numbers of Apprentices have remained largely unchanged, as the great majority of Apprenticeship Qualifications leads onto an occupation within the NSNL and has not seen a reduction in incentive payments.
- There has been no negative effect on numbers for School Based Trainees or Apprentices as the incentive funding has not been reduced. Funding for this training does not come through Smart & Skilled.

Other anecdotal effects that Smart & Skilled has is the effect on the roll out of School Based Apprenticeships:

- There is an inherent incentive for training providers to persuade students to drop out of school to commence post school training, to endeavour to attract the student out of part time vocational training and into full time training. This will enable the training provider to access the funding entitlement that comes with the student. Incentives used by the training providers includes the inducement of being out of school and being able to commence their training to speed up their training completion, and full time employment with a full time apprenticeship wage rather than a part time wage.

(g) Any other related matter

New arrangements for Training Product Development for Australian Industry

On 21 April 2015, the Assistant Minister for Education and Training, Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham, announced the new model for Training Product Development for Australian Industry.

The new model replaces the Industry Skills Councils that have been responsible for the development of the National Training Packages. The new model places industry at the centre of training product development through industry reference committees that will be overseen by the industry-led Australian Industry and Skills Committee.

Factors that lead to a perceived or a known mismatch of supply to demand in agriculture workforce in NSW

RSA contends that mismatches of supply and demand are not peculiar to NSW. Generally speaking there is a 'philosophy' underpinning many state VET policies that training should be more demand driven than it has been in the past and that VET trainers should be responding to demand. Accordingly there are apparent government policy

shifts from supply driven to demand driven training. In many instances VET providers, especially in the public sector, have historically informed industry what it best for it and what will be delivered - a "take it or leave it" approach. Arguably the world has moved on and the attitude by training providers that they have better insight into industry sectors and industry needs is probably no longer the case. Response to consumer drivers is on the ascent. Public providers and institutions seemingly do not have the flexibility or capability to make expedient responses within their bureaucratic systems to meet rapid industry demand driven changes.

In the higher tertiary education sector the argument that the graduate supply has been shown to be insufficient to sustain current production levels could be a result of inexpedient responses by the tertiary education sector to changes to demand that will address supply.

With exponentially increasing advances in information and communication technologies industry is much more quickly and thoroughly informed. Information is instantly accessible and customers (industry and workers/employees) are now clearer about what and when and how they want service delivery in relation to training and education.

Generally, rural industry input and cooperation with progressing training reform and enhancements to existing training arrangements, in particular the development and implementation of national training packages, have been positive and broadly effective. These development processes have involved extensive consultations between industry associations, unions, individual employers, registered training organisations and the wider community primarily under the umbrella of the Agrifood Skills Australia Industry Skills Council.

The acquisition, management and interpretation of a broad range of data are critical to strategic planning and decision making. For any criteria or issues emerging in the agricultural sector to be addressed, comprehensive and adequate data are required to make the best and most logical decisions for responding to both supply driven and demand driven scenarios.

The National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER), the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) all collect and analyse data in relation to agriculture but there is seemingly little analysis and recommendations that inform supply and demand driven agricultural education. The data collected by these organisations could be applied to agricultural education planning.

Challenges and opportunities to increase skills and qualification levels in agriculture through process considered best practise:

As the AHC10 Training Package is progressively reviewed across sectors and jurisdictions it will, in RSA's view, have the capacity to provide an appropriate range of skills development and learning opportunities within all educational sectors (except the higher education tertiary sector that operates under different arrangements for undergraduate degree students and post-graduate degree students).

Vocational skills in rural industries can be acquired in the schools sector through work experience programs (mainly Year 10 or equivalent), structured work placements (mainly Years 11 and 12 or equivalent), VET in schools programs (Years 10, 11 and 12 or

equivalent), and through school-based, part-time Australian Apprenticeships (predominately Year 11 and 12 or equivalent). These programs are very successful for agriculture in terms of participation.

Factors such as the seasonality of agriculture do not always fit with the education system to achieve an outcome (to demonstrate competence in some areas may mean that the student only gets one chance a year to prove competence. i.e. sowing a crop, harvesting a crop, calving etc). The education system needs to recognise that these situations need special attention as well as the funding requirements and assessment strategies.

If the fundamental basic skills (competencies) are to be delivered via VET in secondary schools there must be some recognition by the education system that agriculture has seasonal challenges and requires a different approach to other industries. Too often the schools and education bureaucrats are chasing the prestige of higher qualifications at the expense of the development of quality industry skills.

While agriculture may be delivered at VET level in schools, a fundamental question relates to the real outcome in terms of whether the training translates into jobs or contributes to the resolution of rural skills and labour shortages. RSA has no figures to indicate how many students continue along the agricultural career pathway based on the VET course they may have done at school. With people having many career changes in their working life, the inclusion of some agricultural units/program being introduced into other disciplines may be what attracts people to the agricultural industry at a time they are looking for a change.

Vocational skills in rural industries can be acquired in the vocational education and training sector through VET courses provided by registered training organisations, both public and private, and through contracted training arrangements between apprentices or trainees and employers where both off-the-job and on-the-job training is undertaken.